



PCAC

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**Testimony to the New York City Council
Submitted to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Oversight Hearing on Congestion Pricing and the MTA's Fiscal Future
August 17, 2023**

Thank you for accepting this testimony, which is being submitted to the New York City Council Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure on the occasion of the Oversight Hearing on Congestion Pricing and the MTA's Fiscal Future, on behalf of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA, PCAC. We regret that we are unable to attend in person to testify in person on this issue of critical importance to millions of New Yorkers and visitors to the region.

Created by the New York State Legislature, PCAC is the official voice of riders of New York City subways, buses, the Staten Island Rail, Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North. PCAC strongly supports Congestion Pricing — or more appropriately, “Decongestion” Pricing.

Congestion Pricing will reduce traffic, improve air quality and raise vital funds for critical transit projects. It's a win-win-win for the environment, our health and transit – and for transit riders around the region. Congestion Pricing has been law since 2019 and at long last, the benefits of this first-in-nation program can be realized in the first half of 2024. The Traffic Mobility Review Board (TMRB) has been convened and asked cogent questions. Significant information has been imparted, including the fact that the more exemptions there are, the higher the tolls will be for everyone.

There are those who continue to sow the seeds of disinformation and discontent about Congestion Pricing, most loudly from across the Hudson. That's truly unfortunate, since residents of the Garden State will also benefit from less traffic in the congestion zone and improvements to the New York's transit system. Considering that the vast majority of commuters into the congestion zone – from New Jersey, Long Island, and the boroughs of New York City – take transit, we'd hope that the goal would be to hasten congestion pricing's implementation, and not delay it. In particular, the data shows that the lowest income New Yorkers in most of your districts depend heavily on transit, while very few of them drive or own a car. Much of the opposition has been from a very vocal but small group of drivers, and we hope you'll consider the fact that most New Yorkers do not drive.

Congestion Pricing will improve our quality of life, help protect us from the ravages of climate change, allow emergency vehicles to make better time and save lives, speed up buses, and raise billions of dollars for transit infrastructure improvements like: accessibility projects; new signals; station upgrades; new train cars and electric buses; and improving equity by bringing service to areas without it via new train lines, like the Interboro Express. These important projects will benefit millions of riders and support our region's economy, including creating much-needed construction jobs, for decades to come. The MTA has stepped up its transparency and open data efforts so it will be easier for all of us to see how the money comes in and how it goes out. The money, the projects and the overall effect on the entire region are too important for the significant details to be shrouded in secrecy, and we're glad the MTA gets it and is doing its part to shine light in some of the dark corners.

To complement congestion pricing, the city must also do its part and install the bus and bike lanes and infrastructure it has promised. Doing the right thing to support safer streets, faster commutes, and cleaner air is not always politically popular, as we are seeing on Fordham Road. However, meeting the needs of the vast majority of community residents and bus riders who will benefit most from the streetscape improvements – not to mention the delivery companies and drivers who will accomplish their rounds faster – should take priority over a more vocal and better funded minority of drivers. Congestion pricing will fund essential projects to help modernize the transit network and keep it running, but ensuring that it runs smoothly is a collective effort and the city has not fulfilled all of its responsibilities and Streets Plan commitments.

The MTA's capital budget needs the funds from Congestion Pricing, and riders are counting on the projects it will fund. Similarly, the operating budget, which pays for the service – and recent service enhancements – we rely on is critical to the essential service that keeps our region moving and competitive. PCAC was thrilled when Governor Hochul and the state legislature included sufficient operating funds to keep the MTA solvent for the next five years, without having to worry about exorbitant fare hikes, unacceptable service cuts or untenable layoffs. Instead, riders are beginning to see what can be accomplished when the MTA isn't lurching from fiscal crisis to fiscal crisis: more service on weekends and off-peak on high traffic subway lines, a fare-free bus route in each borough, and planned, moderate fare increases that allow us to budget for the future instead of the drastic hikes that were possible.

This week, the MTA stood with transit champions including this Committee's chair, Majority Whip Selvena Brooks-Powers, to announce that the Far Rockaway CityTicket was finally becoming a reality. Far Rockaway riders will now be able to benefit from the faster commutes and lower LIRR fares that the rest of the city's commuter rail riders enjoy with the 24/7 CityTicket expansion. At the same time that we fully support and embrace this important move toward a more equitable transit network, including rolling Atlantic Ticket into CityTicket to reduce confusion and redundancy, we also lament the loss of the weekly Atlantic Ticket, which allowed riders the option of adding on a weekly unlimited MetroCard to transfer to subways and buses. We have asked the MTA to undertake a feasibility study and field study in 2024 to determine the best way to bring this life-altering weekly option to CityTicket. We appreciate your ongoing support in this effort.

PCAC also strongly supports the Committee and Council's efforts to increase access to transit for those who can least afford it through the Fair Fares program. The increase to eligibility for those making 120-percent of the federal poverty level is a small step in the right direction, and we urge you to continue to fight to further increase the reach of this important program by increasing the maximum income to 200-percent of the federal poverty level. We would also like to see Fair Fares extended to the commuter rails within the city, creating a Fairer CityTicket price.

The work of this Committee and the Council continue to be critical to the lives of transit riders, particularly in advance of congestion pricing. The efforts to reduce the availability and use of "ghost plates" is important not just for ensuring that everyone pays their share to drive in and out of the congestion zone, but also that those drivers can be held accountable for any crashes and illegal activities. We thank you on behalf of transit riders and all users of the streets – above and below ground – for your ongoing diligence.

We are at a singular point in time when we can see what a future of good transit looks like. Congestion pricing will mean that we won't be staring down a summer or winter of hell, that trains and buses won't leave us stranded and that we will be able to look forward to exciting projects like the IBX and a vastly more accessible system. The state's commitment to operating funds means we can actually have better than six-minute service on a number of subway lines, and the opportunity to try new things like a fare-free bus pilot program. The MTA must do its part and find efficiencies and continue to stress the importance of paying the fare – just as the Council must continue to press the Mayor to make Fair Fares even fairer for more people and city DOT to install bus and bike lanes. It's finally a good time to be a transit rider: and the confluence of political will, public interest and economic necessity are helping to align the stars on the right track.